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ABSTRACT

There has been an increasing emphasis on the social responsibility of media within the past 25 years. Social responsibility began with the Fairness Doctrine, the Equal Time Rule, and other Federal Communications Commission (FCC) regulations, but was expanded further when cigarette commercials were banned in 1971. Freedom of speech in programing must be retained and the truth encouraged in advertising. Legal challenges involving the social responsibility of television stations are centered around three main issues: (1) station awareness of the needs and interests of the local community, (2) station discrimination in employment, and (3) the need for more programing of a particular type. These issues will be an important point for media students to study in the future, and a strong background in media theory will be needed to cope with these problems. Social responsibility can either initiate an era of examination and development for the good of society or it can clog the courts with petty complaints. (Author/DS)

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THE USES OF MEDIA THEORY IN A BROADCAST CURRICULUM

Theories of media can be divided into a number of categories:

-Theories dealing with the nature of the medium iteslf

-Theories dealing with the effects of the media

-Others dealing with the economics of the media

-Others dealing with the socio-politics of the media

-Others dealing with the content of the media

-And still others dealing with the structures and functions of the media

Frederick Whitney in his book Mass Media and Mass Communication in Society, for example, writes about the authoritarian theory of media, the libertarian theory, the profit theory of media, the stimulus-response theory of media, the mathematical theory of communication and the ludenic theory of the media.

The function of media theory should be to aid in a better understanding of the media--their structures, their functions, their social utility, their growth and development. Useful media theory should conceptualize through an overview that individuals confronting isolated media problems do not have. Authors Krasnow and Longley in their book The Politics of Broadcast Regulations argue that theory is as important to an understanding of the media as is "formulistic, legalistic and purely descriptive accounts" of how the media function.

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Media theory is perhaps more important for the media students being educated today than it was in years past because of the recent emphasis on media social responsibility which has been developing in this country over the last twenty to thirty years and which has been labeled "the theory of social responsibility."

In 1956 Theodore Peterson explained the "new" theory of social responsiblity as follows:

> The theory has this major premise: Freedom carries concomitant obligations; and the press, which enjoys a privileged position under our government, is obliged to be responsible to society for carrying out certain essential functions of mass communication in contemporary society.[1]

Twenty years later Frederick Whitney still labels the theory of social responsibility as a "new" theory and explains it as follows:

> Essentially, the theory of social responsibility is an extension of libertarianism in that it seeks to protect free expression. Social responsiblity places a burden on the mass media to adequately represent all hues of the social spectrum. It seeks to inject truth in advertising. . . which in the incontrolled commercial world, has seriously eroded a part of media credibility. Social responsibility charges the mass media with the development of and enforcement of ethics in the public interest.[2]

While this theory seems to characterize the utopian state to which media in a democracy should aspire, Whitney presents what he sees as serious weaknesses in the theory.

> . . . any restriction on mass communications, self-imposed or not, is still an erosion of the libertarian concept. And as much as social respsonbility anticipates government interference and future control and seeks to avoid it through self-policing, a part of the media's total freedom is still destroyed. Self-legislation to forestall government legislation is still a form of state control. . . That self-examination and social concern is meritorious on the part of the media is not questioned. Nevertheless, it is an erosion

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[1]Fred S. Siebert, Theodore Peterson and Wilbur Schramm, Four Theories of the Press (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, cloth, 1956; paper, 1963), p. 74.

[2]Frederick C. Whitney, Mass Media and Mass Communications in Society (Dubuque, Iowa: Wm. C. Brown Company, 1975), p. 51.

of freedom of speech. In mass communications, freedom and social responsibility, while related, are not synonymous.[3]

Whitney sees this new theory of social responsibility emerging from:

-a growing distrust of big business, of which mass media industries were a major part

-a growing philosophical skepticism that questioned the basic assumptions of the Age of Reason

-the infiltration of the media by people who sought to right perceived wrongs

-the infiltration of the media by elitists who reflected a growing trend in government and in many other areas.

There seems to be no factual proof that the media has been infiltrated by elitists or philosophical skeptics or people who sought to right perceived wrongs. The theory of social responsibility seems to have been promulgated by large numbers of Americans who believe that:

1. the mass media are major opinion makers because they so heavily penetrate our society
2. the media affect all Americans regardless of age, sex, creed, national origin or geographic location
3. because of their social significance, the media should aid and serve admirable social goals and should be held accountable for their behavior in this regard.

For the electronic media, the concept of social responsibility began with the Communications Act of 1934, which governs electronic media, mandated social responsibility of broadcasters by specifying that the airwaves belonged to the people and that broadcast licenses would be

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[3] Ibid., Whitney.

issued to persons only when the "public interest, convenience, or necessity" would be served. With additional broadcasting regulations including the Fairness Doctrine, the Equal Time Rule and other F.C.C. (Federal Communications Commission) statements concerning broadcast access, the theory of social responsibility for broadcasters was so thoroughly established that by 1970 F.C.C. commissioner Nicholas Johnson was personally instructing the public on techniques to insure social responsibility of electronic media through his book How to Talk Back to Your Television Set.

The legal precedent for social responsibility was boosted in 1966 when 1) John Banzhaf III initiated his first attempt to bring cigarette commercials under the Fairness Doctrine by asking WCBS-TV in New York to make free time available for anti-smoking commercials and 2) when the F.C.C. refused to renew the license of WLBT-TV, Jackson, Mississippi, (United Church of Christ V. the FCC 359F 2nd 994, 1966) because the station was not serving the public interests of the black community in Jackson. Because of Banzhaf's efforts the F.C.C. ruled that cigarette commercials were a "controversial issue of public importance" and as such required the carriage of anti-smoking material and in January, 1971, the President signed into law a bill that outlawed altogether the advertisement of cigarettes in electronic media. As a result of the two above cases, groups all over the country were now told formally that the electronic media were no longer theorizing social responsibility, but were now living social responsibility. With the resolution of these two cases in favor of social responsibility, groups across the country began organizing efforts to make broadcasters live up to the letter of their new social responsibility.

Just one example of the wide-spread public acceptance of media social responsibility was evidenced, perhaps for the first time on an international level, this past summer at the United Nation's Conference on the International Women's Year held in Mexico City. At this conference the delegates adopted a World Plan of Action to improve the status of women the world over and media was considered a vital link in this process of improving the roles of women.

> A major obstacle in improving the status of women lies in public attitudes and values regarding women's roles in society. The Mass Communication media have a great potential as a vehicle for social change and could exercise a significant influence in helping to remove prejudice and stereotypes, accelerating the acceptance of women's new and expanding roles in society, and promoting their integration into the development process as equal partners.[4]

The media were also encouraged to "depict the roles and achievements of women from all walks of life. . . They [the media] should also seek to develop in women confidence in themselves and in other women, and a sense of their own value and importance as human beings."[5] Perhaps the seeds of media social responsibility are being spread in other countries by the United States' theory of media social responsibility which is growing into full reality here.

Because many Americans have become concerned about the omnipotence of the media and their potential effects, the cries for social responsibility have been heard in many corners. All of the media are affected by this concern for media's responsibility to society and its distinct groups. A survey of headlines in the press indicates the pervasive concern over media content, media structure and media functions:

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[4]The Department of State Bulletin, Vol. LXXIII, No. 1975, August 18, 1975, p. 256.

[5]Ibid.

"Jeannie Wilkins Files E.E.O.C. Charges Against University of Houston Station"

"Environmental Group Challenges Oil Company Advertisements"

"Los Angeles Women's Coalition Challenges License of Station KNXT-TV"

"Are Mass Media a Means of Communicating or a Means of Governing Others?"

"Justice Department Files Petition to Deny KMJ License Renewal"

"15 Editorial Women File Charges of Discrimination Against Owner of New Haven Register"

"WPIX Does Not Mirror Its Society"

"Lesbians Issue Guidelines for Media Coverage"

"Food Editor and Financial Writer Charge Discrimination at the St. Louis Post"

"California Moves Toward Non-Sexist Textbooks"

"We are Demonstrating Against the Unreality of TV"

The legal challenges involving social respsonsibility at television stations have centered around three main issues: 1) the station does not properly represent the needs and interests of the local community (the ascertainment survey was faulty); 2) the station discriminates in employment, and/or 3) more programming of a particular type is needed.

The F.C.C. in handling these cases has tended to take each case as a unique set of circumstances and no trend can yet be plotted in their handling of the cases. A good example of how the F.C.C. has maintained its perogative to rule positively to some social responsibility cases and negatively to others is evidenced in their recent discussion of the Public Interest Research Group V. the F.C.C.[6]

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[6]Public Interest Research Group, Environmental Law Institute, Et. Al., V. Federal Communications Commission. U.S. Court of Appeals for the First Circuit, No. 74-1434, August 18, 1975.

> The question in this case is whether a Maine television station, having broadcast-paid advertisements for snowmobiles, must air the viewpoints of those who hold that snowmobiles are environmentally destructive, dangerour, noisy and offensive. . . Complainants argue that the fairness doctrine serves the first amendment by requiring airwave licenses to be true public forums for the presentation of divergent views. The essence of this argument seems to be that the first amendment requires the fairness doctrine either to be enforced to the hilt or to be supplemented by regulations designed to ensure access to the broadcasting media by all points of view. . . . we have doubts as to the wisdon of mandating, rather than merely allowing government intervention in the programming and advertising decisions of private broadcasters. . . . We believe the first amendment permitted the Commission not only to experiment with a full-scale application of the fairness doctrine to advertising, but also to retreat from its experiment.[7]

In some instances the issues concerning the responsibility of the particular medium have been settled in favor of the complainants, in other cases the issue has been settled in favor of the medium owner(s), in the majority of cases, issues have been raised, but are not yet resolved. Regardless of whether issues have been settled in favor of the complainant, the fervor to raise issue of social responsibility and right perceived wrongs is extremely strong as evidenced by the following comments of Kirsten Amundsen in her book, The Silenced Majority:

> Societies are human constructs that can take a variety of forms and should, given our value system, take the form that offers the maximum opportunities for a good life. Present arrangements may serve the dominant, that is, the prevailing interests of the present political system, but that does not mean that the majority of citizens are well served by them. If they are not, then no semi-religious adulation of society's needs can be allowed to stand in the way of change. A society is simply a complex of human interrelationships with certain distinct patterns and a fairly definite boundary. Either of these elements can be transformed, partially, or wholly, and the democratic creed would hold that they should be transformed when they get in the way of desired change. Societies are for people, quite simply, and not the other way around.[8]

The broadcast education student must be prepared to cope with the issues raised by social responsibility. When is it essential to alter

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[7]Ibid., Public Interest Research Group.

[8]Kirsten Amundsen, The Silenced Majority (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1971), p. 55.

media content? How can the broadcast student be prepared for the onslought of media demands from groups and individuals wanting media access, content changes, and structural changes?

Surely one answer for the media students of the 1970s who will be forced to cope with the problems of media social responsibility is a stronger background in media theory which should aid the student in conceptualizing the problems--seeing the problems of media from an overview that will allow responsibile decision making in a democratic environment.

Robert Avery in his article, "Professional Emphasis: Broadcast Education," notes that historically in broadcast areas "the primary broadcasting curricula. . . paralleled, for the most part, the performance and production." Avery notes that the "current trend [however] . . . is toward a strong theoretical orientation that is of maximum benefit to all students, whether broadcast career oriented or not." The reason for this trend as Avery explains it is to provide "a broad liberal arts background that will enable the management-prone graduate to make responsible decisions, as well as the well-informed consumer to recognize the pervasive roles of the broadcast media and know how to affect change on the status quo."[9]

The social responsibility concept can initiate an era of examination and development of our media so that they better serve this society, or it can clog the courts with every petty gripe and complaint from numerour small groups who want their share of the media action. Contrary to Frederick Whitney's observation social responsibility of the media does

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[9]Robert K. Avery, "Professional Emphasis: Broadcast Education," Public Telecommunicative Review, 3 (4: 1975), p. 33.

not necessarily imply media restrictions or a loss of freedom of speech, or governmental interference.

Healthy media can flourish in an advocacy atmosphere. Demands for media responsibility can be stimulating and constitues a much healthier state for the media than placid acceptance of media content and media performance by the majority of Americans.

A. William Bluem in the introduction to Mass Media and the Supreme Court wrote:

> [There are] two unnerving visions of the future. The first is of a "turned-off'civilization, desensitized to the point of dull non-involvement and indifference toward everyone's rights and responsibilities, including--most tragically--their own. . . .there is its opposite; a future civilization dominated by mob-advocacy--by antirational hysteria born of intellectual over-amplification. Those who would prescribe massive doses of "Commitment, Relevance, and Social Concern. . ."
>
> One finally wonders whether the teacher of communications can really hope to define those reasonable essences which lie between the extremes of passivity and over-commitment for an impatient, energetic rising generation. . .
>
> We are still obliged to continue the search for fresh, stimulating ways to bring the young to fuller comprehension of what is treasured by all humans --freedom, safety and peace under just laws.[10]

Social responsibility of the media which was just a theory ten years ago has now moved from theory to practice and with this change, social responsibility has introduced new problems for media management and for educators who will hopefully train students to deal with these new problems. Social responsibility of media can indeed protect free expression, inject truth in advertising, enhance media credibility and "enforce ethics in the public interest," if we as a society can cope with its new demands and if we as educators can provide students with conceptual information to aid them in media decision making that will benefit us all.

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[10]A. William Bluem, in the introduction to Mass Media and the Supreme Court, ed. Kenneth S. Devol, (New York: Hastings House Publishers, 1971).